

*A Brief Report of a Journey up the Rejang River in Borneo.*

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The Rejang is the largest river in the north and west side of Borneo—if not of the entire island. Rising in the unknown mountains called Apoh Byang, it falls in rapids and torrents until the Belaga adds its waters; from here it courses a level table land until the cliffs above the mouth of the Balleh are reached and it channels its way through, or dashes over the rocks in a series of rapids and cascades. The stream, from this point influenced by the tide, finds its sluggish way to the sea, confined by low jungle-covered banks, which farther on degenerate into mangrove swamp—and hedges of nipa palms, whose frond-like leaves reach often a height of thirty feet. The general course of the river is from east to west, and, roughly estimating, it is about 270 miles to Belaga—beyond which the distances have not been computed. At Sibü the mile-wide channel breaks into a delta whose mouths extend along the coast for fifty miles. Foreign timber ships enter the deep waters of the delta, while trading schooners and vessels of light draught ascend to Sibü and even to Kappit, a distance of 150 miles—beyond the latter place only canoes are possible and these ascend often with great difficulty, but away in the mountains the Malay and Chinese trader venture in their small canoes.

Sibü is the second town of importance in the province of Sarawak. Consisting of a Malay village, a Chinese bazaar, a fort and the homes of the officers, it guards the upper river from inroads from the sea. Kanowit and Song are unimportant trading stations. Kappit has the added dignity of a wooden stockade, and protects the people between the falls and the delta from the maurauding excursions of the hill tribes. While the detached fortress at Belaga ineffectually keeps the peace between the warlike mountain tribes whose houses extend as far as the river's source.

Between the strongholds are the habitations of Dyaks, Kanowits, Tanjongs, Punans, Kayans and other tribes, their houses being built close to the bank of the stream that acts as a highway. Almost every tributary stream is a branch-road leading back to some settlement where the natives have gone in search of virgin jungle wherein they make clearings for their rice fields.

Crocodiles infest the muddy banks and terrorize the natives, whose efforts at cleanliness are often rudely ended by the sudden rush of the treacherous animal. Deer, wild pig and wild cattle roam the jungle almost undisturbed, for the natives are farmers rather than hunters and the duties of rice cultivation and the gathering of gutta and rattans leave little time for the chase. Yet the presence of many dogs, the

antlers of deer and the horns of cattle decorating their houses, testify to an occasional hunting excursion.

Their methods of cultivation are crude, and often before the planting season arrives, they find their store of rice is ended; then they must seek in the jungle for their food; roots, ferns, fruits and any stray animal or bird that crosses their path fall to the blow-gun or spear and finds the way to their cooking pots. But rice is the all-important food, and to secure a full supply all their best efforts are given. Preparatory festivals are arranged, field sites are selected and the omen-birds are consulted, for all the tribes are more or less influenced by the omens; birds, animals and snakes being the chief objects consulted. In fact, scarcely anything of importance is undertaken without first consulting the birds and they abide by their decision no matter what the cost. Half-cleared fields are abandoned, a completed new house is deserted, or a war expedition even is turned back, if some insignificant bird whistles, or a frog is seen at some especial time or place. The subject is intricate, deep and absorbing, and shapes their lives as much as any religion could. But when favorable omens are once secured the clearing of forests goes rapidly forward and the heavy layer of ashes obtained by firing the brushwood and logs acts as a splendid and ready fertilizer. A new field is cleared each year and the old one left to return to jungle again. The grain is planted amongst the stumps and half-burned logs and under the influence of the warm moist climate soon springs into a rich harvest. Yet it is a long and weary way from the planting to the granary, for the beasts and birds levy their tribute and the insects often destroy the remainder and the poor cultivator enters upon a season of starvation, or of debt to the traders, who import rice from Java. Fortunately the sago palm grows throughout the island, and though a poor food still helps to sustain life until the return of the planting season.

One planting season a Kayan chieftain conceived the brilliant idea of planting biscuits. He prepared an exceptional field, secured good omens, strewed Huntly and Palmer's best brand in among the stumps and then marveled that the rare and novel grain did not spring into abundant harvest.

The festivals preparatory to the harvest and following it are usually the occasions for great revelry. All the neighbors come in their boats for fifty and sixty miles, or even further; great quantities of rice-spirit (arrack) having been preparing for a month or more. Huge piles of rice are cooked and many pigs are slaughtered. They eat and drink, then have a series of dances, then eat and drink again; by this time some of the men usually require sleep, so they crawl to one side of the veranda or street, while dancing, drinking and feasting continue.

I remember three old men dancing together after many others had succumbed; shaking a brush in front of them with one hand, a naked parang (or sword) in the other, they brushed out the spirits from all the dark corners and hewed and hacked their imaginary forms. I often

wondered if it was an orthodox dance, or a mild form of delirium tremens. When they are performing their rites and omens they suggest insanity to us. It was at the same feast we saw Dyak women in all their best clothes—gaudy, cheap silk or satin sarongs; a brass cuirass, polished for the occasion, which confined their supple waists and extended over their hips; wonderful caps of rattan frame-work covered with beads which branched in all directions, resembling rare insects. One belle, in addition, wore a wide piece of cloth falling from her neck down her back to her heels—a modified Wateau plait—and the bottom was hung with a lot of old brass bells that banged and jangled against her bare heels at every step. But with all this play they do not forget the birds, and we helped fill the baskets with food which were later hung near the new clearings and the birds come and feed thereon and feel more kindly to the tillers.

In the lower Rejang the Dyaks have become successful farmers, primarily because the soil is more fertile than in the mountains and also because the government forts protect them from the neighboring warlike tribes.

Below Belaga they can plant their paddy or gather their gutta without fear, while above this fort at no time are they ever safe, and they always carry their weapons and keep on their guard lest they be massacred by the marauding bands from over the Dutch border. Also in traveling they have the same advantage—where the river is influenced by the tide you see single small canoes going to and fro, while in the upper waters they go in parties of five or six large boats for mutual protection, and also for mutual aid in ascending the rapids; for it often requires their united efforts to haul a boat around a cascade.

You may ascend as far as Kappit in the small government steamers that occasionally go up to the fort for jungle produce, *i. e.*, gutta and rattan. Here you must secure a canoe and a crew of ten or a dozen men; Tanjongs or Kayans are best. In a few hours you pass the mouth of the Balleh, and a short distance above this enter the swift rapids where paddles are useless. Poles are substituted to push the boat over the shallows, while some of the men wade in the stream or walk along the bank pulling at the long rattan which serves as a painter.

This method of progression fails when the falls of the Rejang are reached—a series of small waterfalls with intervening rapids down which the waters rush with irresistible force. Great black rocks or huge wooded islands stand in midstream around the bases of which the water swirls and eddies. Long buttresses resembling walls of masonry thrust themselves almost across the stream and the pent-up current rushes around the end as through a broken dam—or again the rocks rising like a wall form an effectual barrier over which the water tumbles in a number of small cascades. Around these obstructions, or over them, the boats

must be hauled, for they are too heavy to be carried. This labor takes a day at least and often two are consumed before tranquil water permits of the use of the paddle. It requires about two days to traverse the table-land that reaches as far as Dian's house, and nothing breaks the monotony of low jungle-lined shore save an occasional hawk or monkey, nor the intense quiet of the day save the regular click clack of the paddles against the boat's side as they fall in the measured stroke.

When the second rapids are reached, the scenery improves; the low hills are backed by higher hills, and along the reaches of the river the mountains in the interior raise their purple peaks many thousand feet against the sky, rocky banks succeed the low muddy shores and habitations become more frequent. But the ascent becomes more and more difficult, and every mile brings its rapids or small cascade, nor is there any improvement the farther one ascends, and before the last houses are reached the canoes must be abandoned, yet the way still leads up the bed of the stream. The descent, on the other hand, can be accomplished in one-third the time—where you ascended only by the utmost exertion, hauling by rattans, poling or even clinging on with the hands to the stones and branches, you can shoot down at a terrific gait. A steersman standing in the stern and one in the prow guide the boat in and out among the rocks—avoiding the cliffs against whose bases the current seems sure to drive them, or holding the canoe straight as it leaps the small cascades. Few sports are more exhilarating, though many are less dangerous, and the “r-i-p” a jagged rock makes when the boat plunges on it, is not the most musical sound in the world, even to an old boatman, and it is almost certain death to be upset on the rapids.

We secured eleven Kayans to take us from Kappit to Belaga—all young men ranging from fifteen to twenty years old, yet from their life-long experience on the river they were skillful boatmen. We had in addition one child of seven or eight years old, for you seldom see a boat without these nimble and useful assistants. They act as servants to all, in fetching and carrying and are never treated as children, but are made to do a man's part, to suffer and endure as far as their youth and strength will allow. Yet they are not abused, and one and all assist or help them the moment they get into difficulties. The eldest of the party usually acts as head man, deciding on the camping ground, urging the men on to work when they grow lazy or sleepy, and calling them back into stroke when the paddles fail to fall in time. There is usually a wag, who keeps them all merry and often relieves the tedium of the long afternoons by reciting deeds of valor, anecdotes or even jests, while at the end of each line the others join in a chorus and for the time fatigue is forgotten and the paddles fall in rhythm.

There are others who say but little, yet who move to the prow and stern as steersmen when the dangerous places are reached. Some are

friendly, lending a hand at fire making, wood gathering or fastening the boats, while others look out for themselves alone. You soon come to know them all—their names, Lejau, Blari, Deng, Terluat and Leshon; their peculiarities, and their worth, and the fact of their being untaught savages, negligent of dress, careless of life, be it yours or theirs, fades, and they enter into your life, as did your early playmates or your college friends. One youth soon attracted our attention, on account of his happy disposition and his utter unselfishness, and we could always recognize him by his red flannel jacket cut in the Eton style, the abbreviated skirt of that time-honored garment being still further reduced so that it fell but a short distance below his shoulders. We were a party of half a dozen boats, in one of which were some Punans suffering from malaria. The Eton boy constituted himself nurse and cook for them, though they were utter strangers. Our own cook was a Chinaman, and all day he suffered from teasing at Deng's hands, yet when camping time arrived the celestial found his wood collected and fire already started by his never-tiring friend.

If possible we camped near a house, and in the evening we would visit the head man and make a small exchange of presents, usually a chicken on his part and some Java tobacco on ours, but more often sundown found us tied up to a bank, if possible near a small brook. In no time a dozen small fires would be blazing over which each man's small pot of rice was suspended, each person squatting near by tending his fire and waiting for the pot to boil; even the child had his individual pot, while the Chinaman usually required two or three for his more elaborate efforts. We usually sat apart on a log or stone watching them, listening to their chatter, to the vesper songs of the birds, the good-night of the argus pheasant, or the fluttering of the jungle fowl as it flew into the trees to roost. I heard also the awakening of the night chorus of cicades, frogs and birds while watching the sunset in all its golden splendor. As the twilight deepened into night the colors faded and the stars came out like lights in the sky, and the southern cross hung high over the trees. The Malay trader spread his mats and facing Stamboul muttered his prayers as the sun went down. The Kayan child early curled up in the boat to sleep, and one by one the boatmen wrapped themselves in their thin cotton sarongs and stretching out on the stony bank slept the sleep of tired men. The river added its gentle murmur to the night chorus, and ever and anon the "night-jar" raised its plaintive notes to tell that it kept its vigil while the jungle slept.

Beyond Belaga it was considered dangerous to venture on account of the war between two great rival tribes, but finding a friendly chief returning home we took advantage of the occasion and accompanied him. A day's journey we came to the long-house of a former king, now practically deserted because of the planting season, and the men and

women were then living in temporary houses near their distant fields. Even the king's apartments were vacant, for with the changes war and disease ever bring, no heir is left and another dynasty has ended. In front of his door a great slab from the tapang tree indicates his former dias. Quaint, characteristic, Kayan carvings decorate the empty dwelling and the dogs now go in and out without hindrance or molestation.

Oyang Usa's house was the farthest point reached on the Rejang, perhaps 300 miles from the sea, and in the distance the blue mountains mark the foot hills of the range where the river takes its source. No white man has yet visited the spot.

As we descended the river we fell in with some of the warriors returning, and in course of time elicited some facts concerning the recent expedition; tales that rivaled the Indian stories of our childhood. They showed us their trophies, their plunder and their fast drying heads, and lastly with a petition for food they produced a two-year-old captive child whose mouth watered as hungry children's do, when we offered it a bit of food. We floated down the river side by side for several hours, and before we left that baby had a generous half of our stores at its command.

Captives, however, stand second in rank among the spoils of war; a dried and charred head perhaps yielding to no other object, especially when at the feasting and drinking that follows the return of an expedition the women take down the heads from over the fireplace and, dancing up and down the veranda, hey sing of the courage of the successful and taunt those who from want of skill or valor returned empty-handed. Then too they often get quantities of mats, of old Chinese jars, by which they set great store, of weapons of all sorts, and occasionally a rare find in the shape of a string of dingy beads.

These curious old glass beads have fictitious values in their eyes, a single small bead called by them a "Lukut Sekali" may cost as much as a slave, or if you ask the price of a necklace it goes beyond their powers of computation, and the person after thinking for a while will usually say it is worth more than a long-house. They are supposed to be Venetian beads, brought to the east by Mohammedan traders and sold by the Malays and Chinese to the Kayans. The Chinese have tried in vain to counterfeit these beads as well as the old jars, but the Kayan is an antiquarian of no mean skill in the matter of glass and porcelain and the Celestial has not yet succeeded.

On this same expedition some of the Dyaks found the "safe deposit" of a friendly chief, but thinking it the hiding place of their enemies they raided it. At the request of the government they returned the property to the owners, and on this occasion we saw for the first time the "tebuku" or memory knots common to many untaught people. In this instance a bundle of rattan strips tied in knots recording the various

gongs, spears, shields, mats, etc., were strung together in a hopeless tangle, but when the chief, squatting on his mat before the officer, gradually untangled the various pieces, each knot recalled a definite object to him, and he detailed the hundred or more articles without once faltering.

The Punans are an interesting people and differ in many respects from their neighbors. Many travelers consider them the aborigines of Borneo. They are mostly strong, lithe and active, even distancing the strongest Kayan or Kenniah in traversing the jungle. They are nomads, living but a few days in one place, making a shelter that cannot be called a house and abandoning it as soon as jungle produce or game proves scarce, for they are hunters and not farmers, and in this respect they differ from almost all the other tribes. To them also is attributed the first use of the blow-gun and poisoned arrows, and they still can excel the other races, who have adopted this effective weapon. A piece of tough wood about seven or eight feet long is drilled by means of an iron rod so that a perfectly straight tube is made having a diameter of about half an inch. If there should be any curve an iron spear head of the proper weight is bound on one end by means of rattans so that the weight springs the shaft into a perfect line, and they now have a spear and blow-gun combined. The dart of about one foot in length is made from the tough nibong palm and another palm furnishes the pith with which the head of the dart is finished, it being just a shade smaller than the calibre of the tube. The sharpened end of the dart is then dipped in the inspissated juice of the upas-tree, and one of the most deadly and at the same time silent weapons is prepared for use. A short quick puff and a man at seventy-five yards distance feels a prick in his side, he plucks the dart away or plays idly and foolishly with the broken shaft, gradually his motions become more and more incoördinate and he falls to the ground unconscious, and a few convulsive movements ends his career.

They are no less adept in the use of the spear or the parang, as they call their substitute for a sword, than their rivals. Yet sickness, famine and war are rapidly thinning their ranks, and unless they are fostered by the government it will be but a few years until the nomad Punan is forgotten.

They are the only people in Borneo who practice polyandry. The Ukits are a similar tribe and can be distinguished by the singular shield-shaped breast tattooing. They, too, live in a very primitive dwelling, usually built against the buttress of a big tree, which scarcely keeps them dry during the rains.

The story of Bululuk Sabon's misfortunes will give you an idea of how uncertain and dangerous life can be in a Kayan house near the border. Bululuk was a small man, but gained great credit among the people and eventually became their chief. When Mr. Lowe suddenly appeared

in the head-waters of the Rejang, he shamed the people because their houses were poor. So Sabon built a new one that strangers might admire. That was many years ago, and Mr. Lowe's visit remains the first and last, but the house decorated with carvings and having hewn board floors still stands expectant. In the meantime, while many of the men and their chief were away down the river, the Kenniahs came over and killed all the old and very young who could not escape into the jungle. Seven doors remained closed thereafter. Not satisfied with this success they came a second time. His wife, his mother and his child fell in the night attack, and he, with his ten-year old daughter Liban, made his escape. A few more doors were rendered useless after this depletion. Gathering all the fighting men he could command he joined hands with the Dyaks in their recent raid and endeavored to wipe out the score. When we saw him again returning to his almost deserted house his little daughter accompanied him. He was very poor; must even sell his best blow-gun to obtain food. But nothing daunted, he was going back to tend his rice fields, and, if by any chance he found an opportunity, he would take a few more Kenniah heads to avenge his people.

By contrast the life in a Dyak's house, or in a Malay village, may be as tranquil as in our own country, and there the petty annoyances of every-day life assume as large proportions as do the struggles for existence at the sources of the rivers. They feast and dance and make merry, while Buiuluk Sabon keeps watch and ward over his half-emptied house.

If we dared prophesy as to the future of the Rejang's people, we should say, that in proportion as the sturdy hill people dwindle away, the more fortunately situated coast tribes would bear their advancing civilization towards the mountains, and as the country becomes more and more settled, when tribal wars are ended, and a better knowledge of rice culture prevails, they should become a prosperous people.